



News Release

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Spinal Injuries Paralyze Dozens of Utahns Annually

New UDOH Study Shows Most Could Have Been Prevented

(Salt Lake City, UT) – During the years 1998-2003, nearly 400 Utahns suffered spinal cord injuries (SCIs) in motor vehicle crashes (MVCs), falls, suicide attempts and sports mishaps. A new report by the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) Violence and Injury Prevention Program (VIPP) shows the majority of victims are living today with some degree of paralysis.

In Utah, males sustain 72 percent of all spinal cord injuries, and those ages 15-24 are at highest risk of SCI. For those ages, MVCs (including motor vehicle, ATV, motorcycle and snowmobile crashes) are the cause of nearly half (48 percent) of all SCIs. During the period studied, there was an average of one MVC-related spinal cord injury every 14 days. After age 60, falls are the leading cause of SCI for males at 47 percent.

The causes of SCI are very similar among females, with MVCs causing nearly 60 percent for those under age 60, and falls involved in 74 percent of injuries among those over 60.

“This is due largely to osteoporosis and other medical conditions that worsen as women age,” said Trisha Keller, R.N., manager of the UDOH Violence and Injury Prevention Program (VIPP). “Failing eyesight, balance problems and multiple medications can combine to make falling a huge threat to women *and* men,” she said.

Of particular interest to study coordinators is the incidence of spinal cord injury due to suicide attempts. Of the 387 cases, 110 (28 percent) were classified as ‘intentional, suggestive of suicide.’ “This means these individuals attempted suicide, primarily by falling, and survived with a disabling spinal cord injury,” said VIPP education coordinator Cyndi Bemis. Others attempted suicide in intentional car crashes and with firearms and survived.

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Page 2 of 2 - Spinal Injuries Paralyze Dozens of Utahns Annually

“These disturbing numbers should alert all families to watch for warning signs of depression in loved ones and to get them treatment” Bemis said. In addition, suicide prevention specialists say families should take any talk of suicide seriously and get help immediately.

The report also shows the problem of alcohol and drug use and spinal cord injury. Of the 243 SCI patients who were checked for the presence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the injury, nearly one in five (19 percent) tested positive. Medical records show another six percent were suspected to be under the influence, but no blood samples were available.

Of all male spinal cord injuries, 23.8 percent were sustained during high-risk sports and other activities. Skiing and snowboarding, water sports and stunts were the most common. Eleven of the male victims were paralyzed after diving from buildings or other structures into shallow pools. 33-year-old Tim Daynes of Salt Lake City suffered a paralyzing diving injury at age 16.

“I made a mistake that has left me in a wheelchair,” said Daynes. “I dove into the water just off the shore of Lake Powell and hit a sandbar head first. It shattered my cervical spine,” he said.

“Obviously, the lesson is don’t dive into water when you don’t know what’s under the surface.”

“It’s tragic stories like those that point up the overwhelming preventability of SCI,” said Keller.

“Following basic safety rules is the best way to protect yourself,” she said.

- Always wear a seat belt and put children in the right car seat for their ages.
- Don’t ride ATVs on paved roads. Don’t let children ride adult-size ATVs.
- Don’t drive drunk, drugged or drowsy.
- Don’t drink while playing sports.
- Lock up firearms and store ammunition separately.
- Get help for someone with mental health problems or who is suicidal.
- Do strength and balance exercises as you age. Check with a doctor before you start.
- Get plenty of calcium for strong bones.
- Keep halls and stairs well lit and free of clutter.
- Wear sturdy, low-heeled shoes to prevent falls.

For more information, call Cyndi Bemis at 801-538-6348 or 801-550-4228. To speak with Tim Daynes, call 801-474-0051. For a copy of the SCI in Utah report, visit www.health.utah.gov/vipp/pdf/SCI06final.pdf

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